

# The Miami Herald

May 27, 2009

Circulation: 210,884

## Miami Circle site may soon open as park

The ancient Miami Circle site at the mouth of the Miami River may finally open to the public as a modest park, a decade after taxpayers paid \$27 million to save it from development.

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The Miami Circle, the 2,000-year-old Native American site that taxpayers shelled out \$27 million to buy 10 years ago, may finally open to the public under a frugal state plan that would create a low-key park around the ancient landmark.

The \$750,000 plan calls for a paved promenade around the 2.2-acre site at the mouth of the Miami River, a drop-off circle for school buses and cars, modest landscaping and lighting and a few interpretive signs.

The circle itself -- a carving in the limestone that archaeologists believe supported a structure with ceremonial uses -- will remain invisible for now because the state has neither a plan nor the money to display it yet. Instead, stones would mark the circumference of the circle, which is protected under several layers of fill.

There is a hitch, however. The state and the Historical Museum of Southern Florida, which manages the site under contract, are at least \$250,000 short of the amount needed for park construction.

Circle supporters say they are confident the shortfall can be made up by pooling contributions from local and state agencies eager to see the project completed. The goal, said Spencer Crowley, a Miami attorney spearheading efforts to complete funding and get permits for the project: an August groundbreaking with completion by the end of the year.

On Friday, Crowley said, the Florida Inland Navigation District, which finances shoreline improvements and had already invested \$750,000 toward rebuilding a collapsed seawall at the site, approved an additional \$125,000 grant for the project, provided sponsors succeed in raising a matching amount. Crowley represents Miami-Dade on the district board.

**Requests for money are pending with the South Florida Water Management District, the city of Miami and Miami-Dade County, he said. The Downtown Development Authority has agreed to kick in \$25,000.**

"I think we're on the right road now," said Eric Buermann, chairman of the water management district and the Miami River Commission, who has been lobbying the state to open the circle to the public quickly. "We're

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fighting to get some basic stuff done. It's been a long time in coming and it's really past due, but this plan will clean up the site and allow people to go down there and appreciate what is there. It's a big first step."

Meanwhile, Crowley said, he hopes the troubled Related Co. will come through on a pledge of support company officials made while seeking approval for the massive Icon Brickell hotel and condo project next door to the circle. Related officials recently offered to install extensive landscaping to screen off Icon's loading docks, which loom over the circle site, he said.

The plan for a basic park, drafted by Florida-based engineering and landscape design firm Glatting Jackson Kercher Anglin, represents a change of course by state and museum officials, who as recently as January were determined to embark on a lengthy master-planning process that would have put off opening the circle until 2012.

That master plan would tackle the tricky question of how to display the circle without exposing it to deterioration from the elements.

## LONG DELAY OPPOSED

But the lengthy timetable drew protests from the DDA, Miami River Commission members, Miami City Commissioner Marck Sarnoff, whose district includes the circle, and other circle supporters already frustrated by the long delay in providing public access to the site. Their concern was underscored in January when the federal government designated the circle a National Historic Landmark, putting it on a select list of the country's most significant archaeological sites.

The critics also noted the master plan would have eaten up most if not all the money remaining for the project after the seawall reconstruction, which cost \$1.4 million. The Florida Legislature had authorized \$2.2 million for the project.

"We started saying that is really not acceptable," said Ernest Martin, chairman of the river commission's greenways subcommittee, which reviews riverwalk plans. "There was a lot of pressure on the state to do something else."

The state agreed to proceed quickly with a simplified first phase, while leaving the question of how to display and interpret the circle for later. That basic park blueprint from Glatting Jackson cost slightly over \$200,000, leaving under \$500,000 for the project after other expenses are taken into account.

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The phasing-in compromise allows the state to move up the opening date while still eventually proceeding with a full master plan, said Florida Department of State spokeswoman Jennifer Krell Davis.

"The concern was always that we have good planning and not just rushed planning," Davis said.

The circle park plan has been submitted for approvals to the city planning department and the county's shoreline development review board, which will consider it at a hearing Thursday.

Construction of the Miami Circle riverwalk would connect the site to the completed public baywalk behind Icon Brickell. That would allow public access through the reopened Brickell Park just south of Icon Brickell, or through an access drive from Brickell Avenue that runs in front of the development.

## UNCERTAIN DETAILS

Some details are still uncertain. The only parking on site would be two handicapped spaces at the edge of the circular drop-off along the base of the Brickell Bridge, though some supporters are pushing to move those under the bridge. Supporters have asked Related for parking space at the mostly vacant Icon Brickell, but company officials so far have said no.

Planners want to minimize paving on the site, which is sacred to Native American groups.

The 38-foot-wide, ground-level circle consists of carvings in soft limestone that archaeologists believe were postholes for a round structure built by the Tequesta, Miami's original inhabitants.

Archaeologists believe the site -- also the place where the pioneering Brickell family had its trading post -- was a portion of a larger Tequesta village that occupied both banks of the river. Thousands of archaeological artifacts have been found there.

The archaeological remnant was discovered in 1998, when a 1950s apartment building on the site was demolished to make way for a high-rise condo. A public outcry led county and state officials to purchase the site the following year.